

Summary

NPS Winter Use Roving Team Meeting with Governmental Cooperating Agencies

Date/Time: April 20, 2006, 10 am - 2 pm

Location: Shilo Inn, Idaho Falls, ID

Present:

Tamra Cikaitoga, Fremont County, ID

Phil Strobel, EPA

Temple Stevenson, State of Wyoming

Troy Elmore, Idaho Parks & Recreation

Martin Bauer, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality

Lisa Klinger (for Becki Heath), US Forest Service

Carl Wilgus, State of Idaho

Gary Vecellio, Idaho Fish & Game

Yellowstone National Park (John Sacklin, Denice Swanke, Mike Yochim, Al Nash, Debbie VanDePolder)

Grand Teton National Park (Gary Pollock)

Nedra Chandler, Cadence facilitator

By Phone:

John Keck, National Park Service

Jan Livingston (for Larry Jorgensen), Teton County, WY

Tim French, Park County, WY

Tim Puskarich, Wyoming State Trails

Bob Walker (for Pat Flowers), Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks

Bruce Peacock, National Park Service

Observing:

Rick Foster, Blue Ribbon Coalition

Jon Catton, for several environmental groups

Jim Gerber, CUFF

1) Purpose agency/group or NPS gave for wanting a visit at this time:

Joint discussion and information exchange on:

- a) Preliminary alternatives for draft environmental impact statement document – in light of most recent round of feedback.
- b) Current NPS writing and decision making timeline and expectations for governmental and non-governmental participation over next five months or so.
- c) Socioeconomic discussion with NPS economist, Bruce Peacock (why NPS does socioeconomic analysis, how, and questions/perspectives on this.)

2) Results of this meeting and/or next steps:

1. Governmental cooperators will **email any (additional, written) comments** or questions to the NPS winter use team by Friday, April 28 end of day.
2. Participants in this meeting noted that it was helpful to hear from NPS again and helpful to hear one another's perspectives face to face (and by phone). Perhaps more use of conference calls will be helpful in the near term. The group briefly **gave the winter use team some input on the strengths and weaknesses of the various participation modes the NPS winter use team is relying on now:** roving team meetings by invitation, newsletters, website archive, and occasional larger face to face meeting opportunities such as last month's open houses. They briefly discussed the possibility of using something similar to the Shoshone forest "revision fair" as a way for both governmental and non-governmental interested parties to hear from the winter use team, and maybe use the NPS technical experts themselves to guide interested people in their own review of the Draft EIS document when it is out for the formal comment period.
3. NPS is meeting with the full team of technical experts and contract team in May and after that will **send an informational newsletter** to the full contact list with suggested next steps and schedule for continuing the agency and public participation work between now and the release of the draft for public comment next fall.
4. Per the request from Bob Walker (Montana), Bruce Peacock will send John Sacklin PDF files of the **two University of Montana economic reports** (which have been distributed before, but not in electronic format) from past years and then forward them to the cooperating agency contacts. NPS will also post those on the winter use website at <nps.gov/yell/winteruse.htm>.

3) Points raised:

- The NPS winter use team provided the group with a **two-page overview** of how each preliminary alternative has changed since they saw them in March. They also handed out a **30-page draft document** more fully describing each preliminary alternative, detailing actions and assumptions common to all alternatives, and listing actions specific to Yellowstone, Grand Teton and the Parkway.
- The NPS winter use team let the group know **where, how and whether NPS responded to particular comments and questions that government cooperators provided in March.** For example, cooperators had raised concerns about the Cave Falls road (what's the status of the road and how may it be used), issues of accessibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act, concern about the potential for closing the east gate, concerns about use expectations for the Continental Divide Snowmobile Trail, concerns about details related to guiding requirements and best available technology requirements, use of adaptive management principles, and

complying with adaptive management thresholds spelled out in previous NEPA documents, and seeking an alternative that includes both snowmobiles and snowcoaches and that emphasizes/encourages snowcoaches. These and a number of other specific issues were raised in written comments to the team as a result of the March 2006 open houses.

- **Socioeconomics** are of great continuing interest to many of the cooperators and there is interest in reviewing the draft economic analyses when that's ready. The information sharing agreement between NPS and the cooperators (MOU) emphasized the role of the states in providing socioeconomic data to the winter use team rather than the other cooperators (counties, EPA and the Forest Service). Among the points cooperators offered at this meeting: still would like a larger geographic area considered; like the input/output analysis; want focus on east Idaho too – such as impacts to Fremont county and influx from Brigham Young University and Rexburg, Idaho using the park(s); want the study to look at unit value and use of the most current information possible (State of Wyoming offered to help with this.)
- Tier 2 is a new EPA regulation being phased in for full implementation around 2010 that's going to **improve engine emissions**. Among the questions cooperators had about best available technologies for snowmobiles and snowcoaches included the concept of “family emissions limits” (FEL) and whether manufacturers are on board with that, whether NPS is going forward with improved BAT snowcoach, whether one or more snowmobile models would meet the improved BAT for snowmobiles, and timeframes for implementation.
- The modeling scenario that contemplated recommendations from the Cormack Gates study on **bison** is now an element common to all preliminary alternatives (except for #3) and could include partial or full closure of the road segment between Madison and Norris to all human travel (motorized or non-motorized) and continued monitoring of groomed, ungroomed and plowed surfaces by bison and other ungulates.
- Regarding **visitation** to the parks, the conversation emphasized the goal to attempt to provide for historic visitation – to meet the purpose and need while showing what can be done environmentally. NPS noted there is no indication of an environmentally preferred alternative as of yet.
- Regarding **socioeconomic work** associated with this new EIS, Bruce Peacock pointed out there are two economic analysis efforts: one is for the EIS under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the other is for rulemaking purposes. The EIS-related economic analysis will use an input-output model to estimate the impacts on the three states, five counties, and three cities (West Yellowstone, Jackson, and Cody). The analysis will allow comparison among the alternatives as well as to a number of possible different baselines: historic snowmobile use, a snowmobile ban, the current temporary plan, and no snowmobile or snowcoach use. In addition, the economic analysis for the EIS will look at what has happened over the past few years

in the region to understand the relationships between visitation to the parks and regional use indicators (for example, enplanements, ski area use, tax revenues, snowmobile registration, and visitation to forests and other recreation sites). For rulemaking purposes, the emphasis shifts to a benefits and costs analysis. In addition, other economic analysis is required to comply with Regulatory Planning and Review, the Regulatory Flexibility Act (“RegFlex”), and the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act (SBREFA) and will be conducted for the rulemaking. The cost-benefit attempts to monetize all the costs and benefits and reasonably demonstrate that the benefit of regulatory action justifies the cost. The regulatory-related analysis is reviewed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), while the Small Business Administrative focuses on the SBREFA analysis. An early step in the process is to conduct a threshold analysis to determine if this will be a significant rule (which is already done). Both NEPA and rulemaking economic analyses have opportunities for public comment during their respective public comment periods. The RTI memo (which cooperators saw last fall) was intended to look at the scenarios and identify if adequate information existed to conduct the expected analysis.

- Approximately half the area of the park is in Park County Wyoming, Park County pointed out, and it’s crucial from the county’s point of view to leave that **east gate** open to future operators. People move to an area like Park County and Cody because of proximity and access to the Parks and that needs to be acknowledged and understood. If the east gate is closed, one remaining option of plowing outside the park (by Forest Service) could conceivably provide access to the NE entrance. Important not to shut Park County off from access to the parks in winter.
- Regarding the title of preliminary alternative 6 (“**mixed use**”), consider changing that title (no suggestion for something more descriptive was provided). NPS pointed out this alternative provides for a lot of visitors in the park, with more affordable commercially guided wheeled vehicle access – 50-passenger buses might be allowed since plowing would be extended to mid-elevation parts of the park.

4) Questions asked:

What’s the foundation for the numbers in these preliminary alternatives (e.g., numbers of snowmobiles and snowcoaches, percentages, etc.) (Recall earlier court decisions and NEPA analysis fed this, as did scoping. 720 snowmobiles a day is what the temporary plan allows for.)

How many days did you hit the 720 and what was visitation like last winter? (494 was the high over the Christmas holiday, 259 was the mean. In past years the average peak day for winter was around 1400.)

How much is snowmobile and snowcoach use increasing? (Snowcoach use was up 15% and snowmobile use up 20% over the winter of 04-05. 29,000 entered by snowmobile, and 20,000 by coach in Yellowstone alone.)

Is preliminary alternative 1 the no action alternative? (No. Alternative 2 could end up being that, or go back to 1983 regulations, or no snowmobile or snowcoach use. There are many possible permutations for no action alternatives at this point.)

How did NPS arrive at the snowcoach limit of 78 in preliminary alternative 2? (78 are authorized under the current concessions contract. Average day for snowcoaches this winter was 25-29 coaches a day, peak was 54. Follow-up question about how many visitors that amounts to: between 550 and 900 people.)

What's the link between this iteration of the preliminary alternatives and the scenarios that were modeled? (Some are considered but rejected, some will be analyzed further as sound and air modeling are completed. The initial modeling is being done on all 10 scenarios.)

Is there a nexus between alternative 3 and the Grand Teton EIS on bison and elk? (No.)

What's happening with the east gate in these preliminary alternatives? (It's closed in some and open in some.)

Given that preliminary alternative 4 says there can be up to 25 unguided, non Best Available Technology 2006 model or later machines on the Continental Divide Snowmobile Trail, how easy is it to rent a machine in the area? (Easy. Most rental places don't keep their fleets more than 2 years.)

Why not let the machines be 100% non-BAT since the CDST is adjacent to road with vehicles traveling on it? (NPS is still working from the premise that the agency will look at snowmobile use in the context of cleaner and quieter snowmobiles (i.e. BAT). NPS agrees, however, that it is appropriate to look at an alternative that allows for some level of non-BAT use on the CDST; In preliminary alternative 4, the 25 non-BAT snowmobiles per day are not far off the historic levels of use that occurred on the CDST.)

Where did the 1025 snowmobiles a day number come from in preliminary alternative 4? (From scoping comments and this number is in the ballpark of historic higher numbers of snowmobile use. But, another cooperator added – remember that when a number shows up in these documents the decision maker isn't tied to picking one of these alternatives wholesale – through analysis can mix and match a number of components.)

How close is Snow Lodge to full most nights in the winter season? (Not sure currently, recalling 90% range was the norm historically.)

Are Xanterra coaches equipped for accessibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act? (At least one is equipped, and will travel to any entrance to pick up handicapped passengers.)

Why no non-BAT machines on Jackson Lake in any of the preliminary alternatives? And what is the usage? (Non-BAT use on Jackson Lake was in the modeling scenario that reflected the 1983 regulations, and which was found to be unacceptable, primarily because of the way that sound propagates across the flat surface of the lake. Historic use of snowmobiles on the lake was around 30 per day; this past winter there were about 270 snowmobiles total on the lake, up from about 140 the previous winter.)

What about non-guided opportunities to enter the parks? (Here the NPS and cooperators discussed a number of items including the possibilities for private snowcoaches in preliminary alternative 4, and the desirability -- from several cooperators' perspectives -- of having unguided opportunities for entering via snowmobiles. The conversation turned to affordability of the winter experience in the parks, as well as possible options for training for people entering without guides. Alternative 6 would provide more affordable touring options than most other alternatives. In addition, the group considered how to increase flexibility of the guided experience. For example, "silent guides" and using, for example, earphones to communicate with those guides about where visitors want to stop. Even with 100% commercial guiding, these possibilities for flexibility exist now -- e.g., no set itinerary, no "speeches").

What's happening with side roads in these preliminary alternatives? (They are addressed and treated differently in different areas. The majority are currently snowcoach only, with some mixed use later in the day. NPS took the temporal zoning concept and applied it to some other sideroads -- e.g., snowcoaches from 7 am to noon and snowmobiles from noon to 9 pm. Virginia Cascades would revert to skiing only under some alternatives.)

Does/did the air quality monitoring include visibility? (Yes) And the analysis of alternative 6 will include the emissions from plowing? (Emissions for wheeled vehicle traffic will be analyzed for alternative 6, however emissions from administrative use, including plowing and grooming, are not analyzed in any alternative.)

Is administrative use of snowmobiles (by NPS) included in all of the preliminary alternatives? (Yes, in that it is considered an action common to all.)

Regarding socioeconomic analyses, can the impact of people making a lifestyle choice to live near the park entrance be analyzed or not? (Bruce Peacock will take a look at this, not sure -- interesting question there are ways to consider it.) **Will cooperators have input into the socioeconomic study? When? How?** (To be decided.) **Are socioeconomics required by policy to be part of the decision process?** (No.) **Can we look again at the visitor use studies?** (Yes, will be emailed by winter use team.) **What impacts will be measured?** (Jobs and tax revenues). **What areas are being considered?** (Three states, five counties, 3 cities -- West, Cody and Jackson.) **Are you confident this economic analysis is going to be thorough and useful and up to date?** (Yes. Economic analysis provides a decision maker with the relative comparison of economic impacts (measured by jobs and income) between the alternatives as well as

with the different baselines. The basis for the analysis, expenditures by visitors, can be brought up-to-date using cost-of-living adjustments.)

5) Parting Comments

- Appreciation for the comments and the work.
- Found it helpful to hear the perspectives of the other governmental entities around the table.
- The process is good.
- Excellent location for the meeting.
- Showing the highlights and what has changed in the two page table – very helpful.
- Concern regarding lead times on meeting itself and time to review material ahead of meeting.
- Glad people were able to participate by phone, but it was less than ideal – hard to hear, and face to face is better for this type of meeting.
- As the NPS winter use team writes the document, it would be good to have easy to read notes at the start of each section to note differences from previous analyses right away, as well as note any changes in methodologies.
- Presentation of material from the resources experts themselves about new information and what has been learned would be helpful at a future meeting. Hearing right from the original sources is best and avoids the information filtering effects that can otherwise occur.
- There are some remaining concerns regarding the socioeconomic study and whether it could be expanded.

END